Today's sermon text is from the 18th chapter of Jeremiah, in which the prophet is led by God to visit a potter's house. I have always admired the strong, skilful hands that work with clay, in part because my hands do not hold that particular gift. Back in Junior High, I knew that my big brother liked tea, but the only teapot he had was a tiny little thing. So in art class, I set my course for making him a real manly teapot – big, sturdy, good thick handle, must have held nearly 2 litres. Our art teacher did all the glazing and firing, and when he saw this monstrosity I had made, he clearly saw a different future for it... so he glazed the lid right to the teapot! And I can proudly say, 40 years later, that my proudly-created teapot still serves a useful purpose for my brother – as a virtually immovable doorstop.

At Bible Study this past Wednesday, one of the things that encouraged us, was that the potter visited by Jeremiah didn't just give up when a piece of clay wasn't working out. The potter did not abandon the project, or start afresh with different clay. The potter did not give up on this clay becoming a vessel, he simply accepted that this clay would be a different kind of vessel, and with wisdom and experience and creativity, took that good clay and made something even more purposeful and wonderful with it. Also clear in our study time, was that this picture of potter and clay is intimately personal, but not solely individualistic; entire nations and their plans are also being formed by the potter, and at a time of such intense unrest in the middle east we pray that all the nations of the world, those in the midst of the terror and those seeking proper response, will allow God to mould them, rather than being led by fear or a thirst for power.

God forms our spiritual lives in so many ways. Each of us can accept or resist the process, by how pliant we allow ourselves to be in the hands of the Holy One. If we open ourselves to God in many ways – by prayer and meditation, by reading current and classic theology, by reading and studying scripture, by helping people in need, by direct involvement in political action, by engaging in worship and other leadership here at the Church – we give God plenty of opportunities to be "hands on" with our lives. The more we engage with God, the more we allow ourselves to be impacted, changed, formed. Unlike clay, which eventually comes to a point where it really does need to be dried and glazed and fired, God is happy for us to stay moist and supple – perhaps more like plasticene, which can be useful even though it hasn't hardened into a permanent shape.

Sometimes, God hands the clay to us and says, "remember, your hands are my hands in the world" and then our words and actions on God's behalf are formative to someone else. With that in mind, I came across a fascinating story this week from the autobiography of Rev. Charles W. Gordon – Ralph Connor himself, the first minister of this congregation. He tells of a time when he was circuit-riding on horseback in the country south of Calgary, around the year 1890:

"I came to the edge of a lovely little valley. It was like a cup with a rim of gold and blue round it, and at the very bottom of the cup a neat and cozy farmstead set among the willows beside a little lake. 'Someone lives there that is worth knowing,' I said to myself and loped down the hill.... Mrs. Gibson greeted me warmly as I entered the large living room behind which was the kitchen, in an out of which she tripped....As we passed out through the kitchen she said to me, in a low thrilling voice, 'I met your mother once.'


'It was at a Woman's Foreign Missionary meeting in Woodstock. She had driven down twenty miles from Harrington with a young brother of yours.... Well, I must tell you,' she was speaking hurriedly and under deep emotion, 'we went upstairs to lay off our things and had about fifteen minutes together. Those fifteen minutes changed my life. I was in great distress – oh, great distress and darkness! I can't go into that. But she was so kind, so understanding, so bright. She had such a grip on the worth-while things. Well, as I say, I owe all that is finest and best in my life to those fifteen minutes and to the hour at the meeting downstairs which followed. So this house is yours, and all that it holds.'"

The evening proceeded with a meal, some fiddle and harmonica music, and a time of Bible reading and prayer, led by Mrs. Gibson and Rev. Gordon. It came to light that there were no worship services anywhere nearby, but that there was a schoolhouse recently built. Rev. Gordon continues:
“Next morning soon after daybreak I was ready for the road. As I was saying good-bye, Mr. Gibson Sr. [who had scarcely said a word the previous day] said quite abruptly: ‘come back this way and we shall get a meeting for you.’ His family were apparently quite startled. ‘Are you coming back this way?’ he asked. ‘Could you come back this way? You should come back this way. We will get you a congregation.’ Still they gazed at him with wonder. ‘We need you here. We will get you a congregation’ he insisted.” (pp.118-121)

Rev. Gordon returned two weeks later, to that schoolhouse. He describes it vividly:

“From near and far the people had gathered in lumber wagons drawn by oxen and by horses, in democrats and in buckboards, may riding broncos. [As the service progressed, eleven year old Mary Gibson stood to make her profession of faith, and then] the whole congregation, as well as myself, received a shock.

“From his place in the congregation her grandfather [Mr. Gibson Sr.] came slowly to the front and stood beside his granddaughter. ‘Mr. Gordon, I wish to do today what my mother wished me to do more than fifty years ago. I should like to profess my faith in Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord.’ I was so overcome I could not find my voice for a moment or two. I took his hand in both of mine and held it fast, then managed to say: ‘in the name of Jesus Christ, my Lord, I receive you to the membership of His Church.’ As I saw many of the congregation before me in tears, I went on to say: ‘this is a very informal and very wonderful meeting. And I am going to say that if any others present desire to accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord, in His Name, I bid them welcome.’ … How many came I do not now remember, but it seemed to me that almost all those present joined in the Holy Communion.” (pp.127-129)

I love all of that story, as it relates to our power to influence the Christian formation of others: the personal influence of Mrs. Gordon and those fateful fifteen minutes with Mrs. Gibson, the broad influence of that one evening Rev. Gordon spent with a pioneer family, the inspiration provided by young Mary Gibson and her profession of faith that moved her grandfather to do likewise. In all of it, we are reminded of the power that we can exercise in the religious formation of another, as well as the power of receiving such influence, should we choose to embrace it.

It’s impossible for me to think about the potter and the clay and the role of Christian formation, without thinking about the faith formation of our children. In my fourteen months with you, I’ve scarcely spoken about children’s faith development, and what we can do to support this vital task, but this morning, I want to make the strongest possible plea for the good people of Ralph Connor to get fully engaged in our Godly Play Sunday School program.

One of the most important things for me in developing programming for various age groups within a congregation, is that there be a consistency of culture as you move through the ages. I’ve seen congregations where the adults are all very liberal in their approach to scripture but they’ve chosen a Sunday School curriculum that is spectacularly conservative and, not surprisingly, those children see nothing for them within adult church life when they come of age; I’ve also seen congregations where adults are extremely active in practical service to the community, but the youth, who would LOVE to do something meaningful like that, don’t even know about it because all they do is have one games night after another. We do no favours to our children, or to the future of Christ’s church, if we isolate what our children are doing in their religious life, from what the whole Church is doing in its religious life. We need to specifically address the learning needs of children at different ages and stages, to be sure – we’re not going to be putting the latest book by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in the hands of our preschoolers and expect them to get anything out of it – but we do need to always have in mind “what comes next” so that there aren’t jarring dislocations as you move from one age grouping to the next.

This is where Godly Play comes in. At its heart, Godly Play presents children with the great stories of the Bible in a very visual style of storytelling; they are encouraged to think about what they have heard, and formulate what we call “wondering questions” – “I wonder how it would feel to be that character in the story,” “I wonder why God did that” and such. Those questions are engaged openly and honestly, and then the children have an opportunity to do their “work” – to respond creatively to the story, and to their wonderings about the story. In Godly Play, Bible stories are told as is, without moralizing – and because they are hearing the story in the way that the original audience would have heard it, the children are able
to use their own innate religious wisdom and creativity to really embrace the story, rather than just reciting
back what they think the adults want to hear. To me, that is very consistent with what we are attempting
to do here in the sanctuary.

Within the United Church of Canada, and at Ralph Connor in particular, we celebrate the diversity of
understandings that people bring. There is no single understanding of scripture that is mandated, no list
of doctrines that you must understand in a prescribed way in order to belong. We believe that God has
placed within us a yearning for the holy, and that the Bible helps us to make sense of the world within us.
With that being the case, I am delighted that we have chosen to go with Godly Play for our children's
programming. Like our adult approach to faith, Godly Play refuses to dictate the exact manner in which
children will formulate their faith, it embraces questions, and it puts scripture in a central place so that the
language and stories of scripture become integral to the way we understand ourselves and the world
around us.

With all that being said – we need Sunday morning Godly Play volunteers. Yes, this means occasionally
missing the service, and if you’re in the choir, it will leave us one voice short that week. But you’ll still
hear a bit of the music up there, and you can always download the sermon from our blog. Each week,
there is a storyteller – which for now is either Heather or Melanie – but there is also a second adult
needed, the “doorkeeper,” who welcomes the children, makes sure they are ready to really participate,
encourages their explorations of and responses to the story. With time, if we have some consistent
doorkeepers as well as consistent storytellers, the program is bound to benefit, and it gives the children
some more adults in the congregation that they really know. And from what I’ve heard from the
doorkeepers, some of those “wondering questions” really get them thinking about their faith, too.

Indeed, faith development is not something reserved for the very young. Some thirty years ago, a
psychologist named James Fowler studied the stages that people move through as they seek meaning in
life, and he attaches each stage to a typical age at which one moves through that stage. I find myself a
bit skeptical of any model that assumes that a person must go through the steps, sequentially, with the
final stage being kind of a “perfection,” but I do find it helpful to be aware that at different ages we do have
different spiritual needs - and to acknowledge the very real possibility of getting stuck in one stage and
never moving from there, even though further growth is possible.

In his model, James Fowler (p.290) posits that humans begin with the complete trust of Infant faith, move
through an early childhood faith that is very imaginative and a childhood faith that connects with story. At
adolescence, the formation of one’s identity is paralleled by the shaping of a personal faith; at young
adulthood, it’s time to reflect on some earlier learnings and understandings as one forms life goals and
vocation; in full adulthood, one engages paradox and depth, and accepts his or her responsibility for the
world around them. And much as I want to say “it’s not that simple,” when I look at my own faith
development over the years, a lot of the timing and sequences aren’t far off.

You may be wondering, where is God in all this? Do we get faith by plugging away at religious education
at an age-appropriate level, and then when we hit the right age it automatically happens? Fortunately,
James Fowler understood right off the top, that in addition to these stages of faith, “conversion” can
happen at any point along the way. It can be the result of someone’s influential words or actions that
bring us to faith, or it can just be about God being God. In a blunt and wonderful admission, Fowler says
(p.302) “the transcendent other with whom we have to do in faith, is not confined by the models we build
or to the patterns we discern.” He goes on to speak of a God who lovingly goes about the business of
both revelation, and grace: a Holy presence who engages in “initiatives that result in God’s self-
disclosure,” a loving presence who gives gifts “bestowed beyond the powers of the recipient to claim or
demand.”

As with so much of religious life, our task is to be prepared – through prayer and worship and study – and
then to be open to the movings of the Holy Spirit, whenever and however those may arrive. We help our
children, and adults too, to find faith by providing appropriate opportunities for learning, but perhaps the
greatest help we can give is an acknowledgement that God is real, and deep, and loving. We help to form
one another by telling the stories of our lives – how we have been formed by God and God’s people.

We end today where we began: with Jeremiah, and a potter. Although we have an important role to play
in assisting the formation of others, in the final analysis, we are those lumps of clay whose task is to be
pliant and supple in the hands of that loving potter – even if she decides that a radical do-over is what is needed. Envision her hands, strong, muddied, experienced, smoothing down ridges and scuffs that keep trying to assert themselves. Hear the drone of the wheel, powered by the strong legs of the potter as she goes about the mundane aspects as well as the creative. Imagine the workshop, filled with the light of nature streaming in through open windows. See the room full of other vessels created by the potter, each one designed and smoothed by her hands and her plans, each one made of the same clay that we are made of. Bask in the potential of this room, of this wheel, of this life. And know in all of it, that the power to shape is God’s – the power to receive, is ours – and the entire process is one of love, and light, and beauty. Thanks be to God, Amen.

References cited:

Lectionary Reflections Jeremiah 18:1-11 September 8, 2013. In this text we find one of the famous prophetic sign acts that dot the literature of Israelite prophecy. I have noted several times before in these essays that prophets simply do not see the world in the same ways that the rest of us see. When I spy a branch of an almond tree, what pops into my prosaic mind is the lovely taste of almonds that should be forthcoming. But when a prophet, Jeremiah in this case, sees the same branch, he discerns something far different. Since he speaks Hebrew, he hears a pun here. The Hebrew for “alm” (Jeremiah 18:4) translates as “potter’s house.” A. The lesson at the potter’s house and the response to it. 1. (1-4) Jeremiah visits the potter’s house. The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause you to hear My words. i. Jeremiah had been relentless in his condemnation of the three classes of officials referred to here, priests, wise men, and prophets. It is probably a fair inference that it was these men of the establishment who instigated the plot. (Thompson). When he did respond, it was sometimes with a word of encouragement (11:21-23) and sometimes with a word of rebuke (12:5-6; 15:19). (Thompson). (c) 2021 The Enduring Word Bible Commentary by David Guzik ewm@enduringword.com. Jeremiah 18:1-4. Arise, and go down to the potter’s house. Then I went down to the potter’s house, and behold, he was making a work on the wheels. 11 Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus says Yahweh: Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return you now everyone from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. In verses 7-10, Yahweh made it clear that our actions influence his decisions. Hebrews 11:1-10 (Jon Courson). A Private Briefing (Chuck Missler). Romans 5-6 (1982-85 Audio) (Chuck Smith). John 21 - Jesus Says 'follow Me' (Chuck Missler). Revelation 3:1-6 [1990s] (Chuck Missler). Luke 12:1-11 (Raul Ries). Revelation 10-12 (1982-85 Audio) (Chuck Smith). Study Resources :: Text Commentaries :: Chuck Smith :: Jeremiah. Back to Chuck Smith's Bio & Resources. Chuck Smith :: Sermon Notes for Jeremiah 18:1-6. Back to Chuck Smith's Bio & Resources. "The potters house". Sermon Notes for Isaiah 1:18. Back to Chuck Smith's Bio & Resources. Sermon Notes for Lamentations 3:21 Next Book â†. Back to Chuck Smith's Bio & Resources.